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SUBJECT: LEBANON: HIZBALLAH RALLY STOKES POLITICAL FIRES
BACK TO A BLAZE

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah emerged from hiding and made an appearance at a massive rally in Beirut's southern suburbs on Friday (9/22), rejecting calls for his group to disarm (except in the distant future) and claiming it had more than 20,000 rockets. In his speech Nasrallah praised what he called a "divine, historic and strategic victory" over Israel and took a swipe at the majority March 14 alliance and the political heirs of slain ex-Premier Rafiq Hariri. "The resistance is stronger today than on July 12," Nasrallah told hundreds of thousands of supporters. Nasrallah's defiant remarks came two days before the annual rally of the Lebanese Forces, a March 14 ally of Hariri's Mustaqbal party, in which its leader Samir Ja'ja', addressing his party for the first time since his 11-year imprisonment, denounced Hizballah as a "statelet" and called for it to disarm. After relative quiet on Friday and Saturday, March 14 figures also hit back at Nasrallah; PM Siniora asserted that the Hizballah-led war resulted in the "re-occupation" of Lebanon, and Druze leader Jumblatt accused the "resistance" of adherence to Damascus. End Summary.

COMING OUT IN STYLE

12. (SBU) Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah emerged from more than a month of hiding and spoke at a Hizballah "Divine Victory" rally in south Beirut's Security Square on Friday evening. Nasrallah's appearance, his first since the July-August war, was seen as defiance of the Israeli threat to kill him should the opportunity arise. He demonstrated that he could muster and then control a crowd which, by some estimates, reached over 400,000 people (which, while fewer than Hizballah's target of a million, was around 10 percent of Lebanon's population). A scattering of other-party representatives in the sea of yellow flags, in particular General Michel Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), may have lent Hizballah some political cover. However, it is noteworthy that Nasrallah did not mention Aoun or FPM directly, which some have interpreted as a move to spare Aoun any additional loss of supporters from his association with Hizballah.

THE SPEECH

13. (SBU) Sweating and playing with his black turban, Nasrallah appeared more defiant and confrontational than he had in televised interviews during and since the war, stressing that the victory and steadfastness of the "resistance" had foiled the US plan for a New Middle East and provided a model for liberation. Nasrallah put UNIFIL on notice -- or depending on the interpretation, threatened UNIFIL -- over what Hizballah has called an illegitimate expansion of UNIFIL's mandate (i.e., disarmament in the south and patrol of Lebanese waters). He also warned UNIFIL not to "spy" on Hizballah, a possible reference to the UNIFIL leadership's interpretation that under UNSCR 1701 it is empowered to undertake investigations relating to arms smuggling.

14. (SBU) On arms, Nasrallah claimed that Hizballah was stronger than ever, with 20,000 missiles, and that the party would not disarm until the reasons for the arms are removed -- i.e., Israeli occupation of the Sheba'a Farms and holding of Lebanese prisoners. Depending on the interpretation, he may also have linked Hizballah's arms with the establishment of a "clean" government free of corruption -- an apparent reference to the Hizballah and FPM charge of corruption under the leadership of the Hariris. Keeping to an anti-Sunni theme, Nasrallah shamed Arab regimes which were slow to express support for Hizballah during the war -- and who fail to fight for Palestine (suggesting that, with the proper action, Israel might disappear). He further criticized the government and Prime Minister Siniora saying that the "current government is capable of neither protecting Lebanon nor rebuilding it." Addressing PM Siniora indirectly,

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Nasrallah said "it is not with tears that we can protect Lebanon" in reference to the PM's tears at the Arab Foreign Ministers meeting in July in Beirut.

15. (SBU) On politics, Nasrallah repeated the Hizballah and FPM demand for a "national unity government" likely entailing an expansion of the cabinet to include additional ministers from those two parties, and augmenting non-March 14 representation on the Cabinet. He also called for a new electoral law to replace one left behind by the Syrians -- a reform backed by Aounists/FPM which might give Christians more political power, and strengthen Shiite power to an even greater degree.

THE REACTION -- LEBANESE POLITICS TURNS UP THE VOLUME AGAIN

16. (SBU) The immediate reactions of post's March 14 contacts to Nasrallah's speech emphasized its relative mildness compared to the fearful expectations of many. One contact in the Prime Minister's office reacted with relief, and the lone Maronite MP in the Mustaqbal party told polchief that the speech was "mild." A short statement issued by PM Siniora's press office Saturday said Nasrallah's focus & on the dialogue in his speech is a good and constructive thing and opens future horizons.⁸ Observers' initial reactions to the speech may have been tinted with relief that the rally remained peaceful and that there had been no apparent or explicit threat to public order.

17. (C) As the weekend progressed Hizballah's opponents became more vocal. Meeting with a White House-sponsored delegation on Saturday afternoon, Siniora said that he was fighting for progress in Lebanon and that Hizballah was trying to take the country in a different direction. During a subsequent televised interview, the PM said "even though we welcomed the call for open dialogue, this does not mean we do not have some comments regarding a number of issues." He noted that as a result of the war the country was occupied once again and emphasized that "we" -- March 14 -- are working to liberate it. Siniora concurred with Nasrallah's objectives

of having a strong, capable, and clean government but said "we have to help and work hard to establish such a government."

18. (SBU) On Sunday, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt spoke out against the "Divine Rally" on a Sunday meeting with his Progressive Socialist Party's youth organization in Mukhtara. Jumblatt said that his main disagreement with the resistance is its adherence to the Syrian regime. He added "the strong, just and capable state is the state of law, one law with the weapons in the hands of the Lebanese army and the decision of war and peace is that of the Lebanese state." Jumblatt rejected Nasrallah's demand that he apologize for calling Hizballah supporters "mindless" and said that if there was anything he should apologize for, he should apologize to his father -- murdered by the Syrians -- for remaining an ally of Syria for years.

19. (SBU) Druze Communications Minister Marwan Hamadeh said that he would have hoped that Nasrallah's speech was less aggressive towards the Arabs and his Lebanese partners. Hamadeh said "we heard attacks against the Arabs and Americans more than we heard attacks against the Israelis." Hamadeh added that he had understood from Nasrallah's speech "he will not hand over the weapons except to a strong and just state; he will not hand it over except to himself." Hamadeh rejected Nasrallah's call to form a national unity government saying "we will not allow Presidents Lahoud and Assad to form a government once again."

110. (SBU) Former President Amin Gemayel echoed many of Hamadeh's sentiments, saying that Nasrallah extended his hand to various Lebanese parties but at the same time was confrontational and made some dangerous statements. Gemayel added "Nasrallah linked the disarmament of Hizballah to major changes in the government; this is surprising and dangerous and make us question what kind of government does Nasrallah want?"

LEBANESE FORCES RALLY

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UNEXPECTED NUMBER OF SUPPORTERS

111. (SBU) On 9/24, the annual Lebanese Forces rally for Christian victims of the civil war, kicked off by a Maronite mass at Harissa Cathedral, featured Samir Ja'ja' as speaker for the first time since his 11-year imprisonment. Social Affairs Minister Nayla Mouawad and several MPs, including at least two Aounist MPs, attended. In a speech outside the cathedral, Ja'ja' addressed a crowd numbering at least in the tens of thousands and possibly more than 100,000. Ja'ja's rally choked roads for miles around and provided the visual counterpoint to Hizballah's Friday gathering.

112. (SBU) The Lebanese Forces leader attacked Hizballah for refusing to disarm and for taking unilateral action resulting in war. He accused Hizballah of maintaining a "statelet" within Lebanon and of trying to undermine the Ta'if Agreement, and tarred Nasrallah for taking pride in his ties to Syria. Ja'ja' called upon Hizballah to become a "political resistance" rather than an armed one. While attendance at the important Maronite commemoration is a can't-miss for any Maronite group, FPM officials went on the attack against Ja'ja' immediately thereafter, claiming he has no program (other than March 14's) and is out of touch with Lebanon after his long imprisonment.

COMMENT

113. (C) In mid-September, it appeared that stability was creeping into Lebanese politics. Flush with diplomatic victories that had secured an end to the war, a strong UN resolution calling for disarmament, and massive donor

support, there seemed little to quarrel with in the performance of the Prime Minister and his government. Hizballah, meanwhile, was stumbling to live up to its promises of reconstruction aid, and Michel Aoun -- at least to his detractors -- seemed to hemorrhage support on a daily basis. For almost two weeks after the lifting of the blockade, public recriminations seemed to fade and the country seemed ready to get down to the sober business of reconstruction against the backdrop of Ramadan. Perhaps it was the realization of fading support, and the approach of the holy month, which led Hizballah to choose last Friday for an attention-grabbing rally. The reaction to the rally may have deflated Hizballah's image for now, and it remains to be seen whether the party's Ramadan activities -- likely revolving around charity -- will suffice to enhance it again.

However the images of Hizballah's throngs will remain etched in the memories of the public and the political class, and may yet prey on the courage and resolve of the latter. In short, Lebanon starts Ramadan deeply divided. Rabble-rousing nightly iftar speeches are unlikely to contribute to a national consensus about what comes next.

FELTMAN